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SUBJECT: ARMENIAN YEZIDIS: POVERTY, EDUCATION, AND ETHNIC
IDENTIFICATION ARE MAIN CONCERNS

REF: A. 07 YEREVAN 1300
[1](#)B. 07 YEREVAN 1259

Classified By: AMB Marie L. Yovanovitch, reasons 1.4 (b, d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (U) In September and October 2009, Embassy officers met with members of the ethnic Yezidi community, Armenia's largest minority group. Ethnic identity, education, and endemic poverty are the main issues that confront the Yezidis. There is a dispute in the Yezidi community as to whether Yezidis are Kurds. The global economic crisis has hit the Yezidi community particularly hard due to falling remittances from abroad and stalled government infrastructure projects. Nonetheless, Yezidis do not appear to be suffering from discrimination by the ethnic Armenian majority. End Summary.

BACKGROUND

[1](#)2. (U) There are approximately 80,000 Yezidis living in the Former Soviet Union (FSU) with the largest concentrations in Armenia, Russia, and Georgia respectively. Yezidis represent Armenia's largest ethnic minority with a population of approximately 40,000 according to the 2001 census. While found throughout Armenia, Yezidis primarily live in mountainous areas suitable to sheep herding and cattle raising in Armenia's Armavir, Aragatsotn, Ararat, Yerevan, and Shirak regions.

[1](#)3. (U) Yezidis practice a syncretic faith based on several religions, but whose roots are most heavily influenced by the Sufi Islamic mystic Sheikh Adi. Consequently, the most holy Yezidi religious shrine is the tomb of Sheikh Adi, located in Lalish, Iraq. However, most Yezidis from the former Soviet Union (FSU) cannot make a religious pilgrimage to Lalish for economic and security reasons. Currently, Armenian Yezidis have little or no contact with Yezidis outside of the FSU.

LOCAL LEADERS CITE ECONOMIC ISSUES AS CHIEF CHALLENGES

[1](#)4. (SBU) On September 2, Poloff visited Yerevan State University (YSU) Professor of Oriental Studies Garnik Asatrian to learn more about conditions for minorities in Armenia. Asatrian confirmed that Yezidis occupied the lowest category of Armenian society in terms of income and education levels. However, he assessed these problems to be more a

function of Yezidis' socio-cultural norms and Armenia's clan economic system than of racial or religious discrimination. Asatrian pointed to the Armenian Government's provision of Yezidi language text books for primary school, government subsidized radio, and the existence of a Yezidi language newspaper as examples of its inclusiveness of minorities.

15. (SBU) On September 22, Poloff held a meeting with the head of Yezidi public radio Hasan Tamoyan to discuss the key problems his community faces in Armenia. Tamoyan identified education issues and the poor economy as key issues for the community, although he noted that the difficulties that his community faces were not unique to his ethnic group. In fact he believed that Yezidis in Armenia were afforded more recognition and special status from the government than in other FSU countries. According to Tamoyan, many Yezidis simply choose not to go to school and women marry very young.

16. (SBU) During an October 15 visit to the Aragatsotn region, the Ambassador met with local Yezidi leaders from the villages of Algyaz, Sipan, and Jamshlu. These included Mayor of Algyaz Aziz Mhoyan, Tengiz Mamoyan of Sipan, and Tital Aloyan of Jamshlu. The discussion focused on the economic hardships caused by decaying or non-existent infrastructure and services, as well as on the out-migration of young people due to limited employment opportunities. In addition, the cattle-breeding and sheep-herding on which these villages depend have been adversely affected by harsh weather and limited pasture land

17. (SBU) Aziz Mhoyan pointed to gasification of his village as a key challenge, which was due to be finished by 2010, but

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had stalled due to budget shortfalls associated with the global economic crisis. He expressed frustration that the main gas pipeline was less than one mile away. Similarly, Tengiz Mamoyan identified the paramount problems for his community as inadequate heating and insufficient access to clean water. Meanwhile, Tital Aloyan cited the lack of medical facilities or a functioning school as the primary problems his village faced.

18. (SBU) All three leaders acknowledged the critical role that foreign remittances played in the survival of their communities: In Alagyaz, Sipan, and Jamshlu, 80-90 percent of families rely on remittance from abroad. The need for foreign remittances is directly connected to the emigration of youth since 1991, which the communities heads cited as another threat to Yezidi society in Armenia.

ARE THE YEZIDIS REALLY KURDS?

19. (SBU) Yezidi leader Tamoyan also noted that the cultural mis-identification of Yezidis as Kurds as a major problem for the community. He said the confusion stems from the linguistic similarity between Armenian Yezidis and Kurds who both speak a Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish. This misidentification was exacerbated by the 1989 Soviet Census that counted Yezidis and Kurds as one ethnic group. According to Tamoyan, there are no more than 1,500 ethnic Kurds in Armenia, and they define themselves as separate from the Yezidi community. Tamoyan also pointed to the religious-based ethnic strife between Kurds and Yezidis in Northern Iraq over the past two years as an example of how the communities differentiate themselves.

110. (C) However, when the Ambassador visited Aragatsotn Marz, the local Yezidi leaders were adamant that they are Kurds, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically. The only point of difference between the groups is religion, they declared. The Aragatsotn Yezidis said that a group of "illiterate" Yezidi in Aragats Marz (where the majority of Yezidi live) do

not understand this and believe that they are not Kurds. The Aragtosotn Marz leaders attributed this belief, at least in part, to the Soviets who they allege tried to divide and conquer minorities and established a new minority of "Yezidi" in the last Soviet census of 1989. Clearly, the matter of whether one is Kurd or Yezidi remains open for debate. According to George Washington University's Dr. Mark Yoffe (ref A), "Self-identification as either Yezidi or Kurd largely depends on self-perceptions." (Comment: The fact that ottoman Kurds played a significant role in the exile and massacres of Armenians in the late Ottoman Empire may also be a factor in Armenian Yezidis' reluctance to identify themselves as Kurds. End comment.)

REPRESENTATION IN ARMENIA

¶11. (C) When the Ambassador asked about the existence of an umbrella organization that could represent the needs of the Yezidi minority, community leaders said that there were several organizations, but acknowledged that the Yezidis did not speak with one voice. Rather many of the Yezidi organizations and NGOs in Armenia were personality driven and concerned primarily with the interests of their leaders. Nonetheless, all three leaders agreed that an umbrella organization would be more effective in securing economic assistance from the Yezidi expatriates and wealthy communities in Russia's far east. (COMMENT: We were left with the impression that the divisions in the community caused by the Yezidi versus Kurd debate hampers the establishment of an effective and unified organization that can represent the interests of the Yezidi. END COMMENT)

IMPLICATIONS OF THE ARMENIA-TURKEY BORDER OPENING

¶12. (C) During a September 2 meeting with poloff, Garnik Asatrian expressed concern about the possible effects an open Armenia-Turkey border could have in radicalizing the Yezidi and Kurdish communities in Armenia. Asatrian stated that currently the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK/KGK) was able to

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broadcast its TV channel into Armenia by satellite to reach Kurdish speaking communities there with extremist propaganda. However, an open border with Turkey would allow for more direct contact between PKK/KGK elements in Turkey and Kurdish speakers in Armenia, and possibly assist extremist recruiting efforts. (Comment: Asatrian's view strikes us as alarmist. While Armenia's Yezidis/Kurds may feel solidarity with Kurds asserting their ethnic identity in other countries in the region, there is no evidence that they have actively supported broader Kurdish political movements. In addition, the prospect of an open border presupposes an improving relationship between Armenia and Turkey. In that context, efforts by PKK/KGK elements to radicalize and activate Armenia's Yezidi/Kurdish population against the Turkish authorities would not be welcome by the GOAM. Consequently, we would expect the authorities in Yerevan would have little difficulty in monitoring any such efforts and preventing their success. End comment.)
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